

Burnout syndrome and work satisfaction in professionals of social work in prisons of Spain

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The specialized literature has revealed the high prevalence of burnout syndrome in the workforce of different prisons worldwide, as well as the influence of various risk factors associated with sociodemographic and occupational factors linked of the emergence of this occupational health problem. The current study measures the level of burnout and job satisfaction among the group of social workers Spanish prisons.

Methods: A cross-sectional analytical study was carried out on 59 social work professionals at the national level during 2017. Using ad hoc questionnaires, the participants offered information regarding sociodemographic, labour, Maslach Burnout Inventory and job satisfaction from Warr, Cook and Wall information.

Results: The values obtained were 20.1 (standard deviation [SD]: 11.9) in the emotional exhaustion dimension, 10.6 (SD: 5.0) in depersonalization and 27.7 (SD: 23.2), for personal accomplishment, and a general level of satisfaction of 55.3 (SD: 11.9). We found statistically significant associations and predictive values between the different dimensions of burnout and job satisfaction at sociodemographic (age) and work level (time in the profession) level.

Conclusions: In line with the scientific literature, social workers in prison have a high level of burnout, especially emotional exhaustion, in addition to a moderate level of job satisfaction. The information offered could be useful in the elaboration of prevention strategies aimed at improving the occupational health of this group.

Keywords: workers; burnout; job satisfaction; working conditions; risk factors; social work; prisons; Spain.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, scientific literature has brought to light the prevalence of several health issues directly affecting the imprisoned population worldwide, such as the prevalence of mental disorders¹, alcohol and drug abuse² or victimization³. However, there is a lack of studies addressing the working conditions of correctional and treatment staff in prisons.

Working in prisons is physically and psychologically demanding, since this environment entails health and safety hazards which are relatively unique in comparison with other workplaces⁴. According to Armstrong and Griffin⁵, "few other institutions are responsible for supervising and ensuring an unwilling and potentially violent population".

As a consequence of working with people who are held against their will, workers must bear increased pressure which can lead to burnout syndrome⁶. This entails emotional exhaustion (referring to the depletion of the individual's emotional resources), depersonalization (referred to the degree of indifference and apathy towards the rest of the society) or a low awareness of personal accomplishment (low degree of self-efficiency and presence of constant negative feelings about oneself). This all can imply the worker's low performance⁷ or even impaired physical⁸ and/or emotional⁹ health.

For the last decade, several international studies have found a high prevalence of burnout syndrome among correctional staff in the United States¹⁰, Europe¹¹ and Latin America¹², with results signifi-

cantly higher than those of other working environments¹³.

Several socio-demographic and work-related factors have been found to be associated to an increased risk for burnout syndrome among correctional staff, including being a woman¹⁰, an older age¹⁴, certain work shifts¹⁵ or a longer experience in the task developed¹⁰. Nevertheless, prison overcrowding has been traditionally the main risk factor associated to the presence of this syndrome among correctional workers. An overcrowded prison directly implies that its workers are forced to develop more tasks due to increased needs and demands from people deprived of their liberty^{16,17}. For example, in the United Kingdom¹⁸, since 2000 its imprisoned population has risen by approximately 25% yet its correctional staff has barely done so by 10%.

In Spain, previous studies have shown a high prevalence of the three dimensions of burnout among correctional staff from the Secretary General of Penitentiary Institutions. Mostly, the main tool used to measure this has been the Maslach Burnout Inventory¹⁹ (MBI) which has proven highly reliable for the correctional staff in Spain²⁰.

In the study by Bringas-Molleda *et al.*¹¹ on 222 workers (aged between 18 and 60) from different prisons in Spain, there was a significant score in the dimensions of emotional exhaustion (M= 21.8, standard deviation [SD]: 12.6) and depersonalization (M=8.5; SD: 6.7). Both increased scores correspond with those concluded by Hernández-Martín, *et al.* (2006)²¹ on 133 correctional officers regarding emotional exhaustion (M=24.6, SD: 11.8) and depersonalization (M=12.6; SD:6.8).

Based on the position within the prison¹¹, surveillance staff presents a higher prevalence of emotional exhaustion (65.0% vs. 42.9%) and depersonalization (70.6% vs. 38.1%) together with lower personal accomplishment (51.5% vs. 90.5%), than treatment staff. In accordance with international literature, the main risk factors for its appearance are: gender, age, work hours, work status and previous experience in the current position^{21,22}.

According to the analysis of previous literature, the objectives aimed in this study among correctional social workers are: a) to know the prevalence of the different dimensions of burnout syndrome; b) to assess the degree of job satisfaction; c) to determine the socio-demographic and work-related variables associated to the appearance of burnout syndrome and to the degree of job satisfaction; and d) to analyse the potential association between the different dimensions of burnout and the degree of job satisfaction.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

A descriptive cross-sectional study on social workers in Spanish prisons has been carried out throughout January and February 2017. This is how, by means of the collaboration of the Association of Correctional Social Workers (Asociación de Trabajadores Sociales de Instituciones Penitenciarias [ATSIP]) the principal investigator (PI) contacted via email 81 social work coordinators from different standard correctional facilities (75) and centres for social inclusion (6) nationwide. Prior fieldwork, the president of ATSIIP was contacted to request information on the number of social workers included in the organization. The inclusion criteria to participate in the present study were: a) to be member of ATSIIP, b) to be currently active as a social worker in a correctional environment and c) to accept the corresponding informed consent to each questionnaire.

Finally, 59 social workers (56 from correctional facilities and three from centres for social inclusion) participated, 73% of the whole spectrum (81 members), by means of an anonymous and voluntary questionnaire. The reasons for not participating were not sought among those who declined to take part. In order to carry out the research, prior authorization by ATSIIP was sought, and the information gathered was always in accordance to the dispositions of Act 15/1999 on the protection of personal data.

As to collect the relevant information, an ad-hoc questionnaire was prepared, adapted from previous studies, exclusively developed for this purpose and including the following sections:

1. *Socio-demographic and work-related variables*: adapted from a previous study⁶, including information on the gender of the participant (male/female), age (continuous variable, in years), length of work experience (continuous variable), type of employment status (indefinite/ fixed-term) and work shift (exclusively morning/ morning and afternoon).
2. *Burnout-related variables*: the prevalence of burnout was determined by means of Maslach and Jackson's MBI¹⁹, which has proven to be highly reliable and internally consistent with correctional staff in Spain^{11,20}. It is divided into three dimensions: 1) emotional exhaustion (EE), which determines the possibility of being emotionally exhausted due to a high work demand (low 0-18; average 19-26; high over 26 points); 2) depersonalization which measures an unfeeling and impersonal response toward recipients of one's service, care, treatment, or instruction (low: 0-15; average

6-9 points; high: over 9 points); and 3) personal accomplishment (PA) which measures feelings of competence and successful achievement in one's work and which is measured inversely to the other dimensions (high: 0-33 points; average 34-39 points, low: over 39 points). The questionnaire includes 22 Likert-like items (from 0 [never] to 6 [always]). In this study we achieved an appropriate coefficient in Cronbach's alpha test (internal consistency): 0.88, 0.69 and 0.78 for EE, depersonalization and PA correspondingly.

3. Job satisfaction: As to determine the degree of job satisfaction, we used a Spanish adaptation²³ of Warr's *et al* Job Satisfaction Scale²⁴, including 15 Likert-like items (1 being the lower score [not at all satisfied] and 7 the higher score [completely satisfied]). The overall score of the satisfaction scale ranges between 15 and 105, and thus higher scores show higher overall satisfaction degrees. Apart from the degree of overall job satisfaction, there are intrinsic factors (for example: "freedom to choose your own working method") and extrinsic factors (for example, "physical conditions of the job position"). With regard to the psychometric properties, the degree of internal consistency was 0.82, 0.78 and 0.72 for overall satisfaction, intrinsic and extrinsic factors, correspondingly.

The analysis of data was carried out by IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software, version 20.0 in the following stages: First, the prevalence and 95% confidence intervals were calculated for sociodemographic and work-related variables for the whole sample (N=59) and according to the gender of participants (39 female, 20 male), as well as statistically significant associations by means of 2x2 contingency tables and Student's t test for quantitative values (age and job experience). Then intermediate scores were obtained together with SD and ranges for the burnout and job satisfaction questionnaires, as well as the statistically significant associations according to gender by means of Pearson's chi-squared test. After that, the influence of sociodemographic and work-related variables was determined for both questionnaires. Last, the statistically significant associations between the MBI questionnaire and the job satisfaction survey were determined. For all purposes, a 95% degree of significance was adopted ($p \leq 0.05$). In order to carry out this study, prior authorization by the ATSIIP was sought, always ensuring the anonymity of participants in accordance with the dispositions of Act 15/1999 for the protection of personal data.

RESULTS

The sample included thirty-nine women (66%) and twenty men (34%), aged between 27 and 65. Table 1 depicts sociodemographic and work-related variables for the overall sample and according to genre. The average age of participants was 44.9 years (SD: 7.9). Most of them (93.2%) had indefinite contracts and over half of the sample (59.3%) exclusively had morning shifts. According to genre, the percentage of male participants with exclusively morning shifts was slightly higher than that of female participants (65.0% vs. 56.4%). There were no statistically significant associations between the genre and any of the variables studied.

The average scores for the dimensions of MBI and the questionnaire on job satisfaction for the sample as a whole and according to genre are depicted on Table 2. In the MBI questionnaire, for the whole sample, the average scores were 20.1 (SD: 11.9) for emotional exhaustion; 10.6 (SD: 5.0) for depersonalization and 27.7 (SD: 23.2) for personal accomplishment. According to genre, the scores for emotional exhaustion (22.6 vs 15.3; $p = 0.014$) were significantly higher for women than for men.

In the questionnaire on job satisfaction (see Table 2), the average score on overall satisfaction was 55.3 (SD: 13.8), this being significantly higher in women than in men (59.3 vs. 53.3; $p = 0.043$). Moreover, we found that the degree on job satisfaction for all participants as for intrinsic and extrinsic factors was 32.6 (SD: 7.3) and 22.7 (SD: 7.6) correspondingly, this being slightly higher among women than among men for both intrinsic (34.3 [SD: 8.6] vs. 31.7 [SD: 6.5]) and extrinsic factors (24.9 [SD: 7.6] vs. 21.6 [SD: 7.4]).

Table 3 shows the associations between the MBI questionnaire and that on job satisfaction with sociodemographic and work-related variables. Statistically significant associations were found between the dimensions of emotional exhaustion (EE) and personal achievement (PA) with the participant's genre ($r = 0.294$; $p = 0.024$; and $r = 0.075$; $p = 0.042$ correspondingly) and their time worked ($r = 0.314$; $p = 0.016$; and $r = 0.411$; $p = 0.032$, correspondingly). The variable depersonalization was not significantly associated with any of the variables included in the MBI questionnaire. None of the sociodemographic and work-related variables were statistically associated with any of the scales of the questionnaire on job satisfaction.

The results of bivariate correlation analysis between the dimensions of the MBI questionnaire and that on job satisfaction are depicted on Table 4. Statistically significant variables were found between the

dimension of emotional exhaustion and overall satisfaction ($r=0.336$; $p=0.009$), intrinsic factors ($r=0.292$; $p=0.025$) and extrinsic factors ($r=0.328$; $p=0.011$). The dimension personal achievement was statistically associated with overall satisfaction ($r=0.316$; $p=0.015$) and with extrinsic factors ($r=0.350$; $p=0.007$).

DISCUSSION

In this study we have observed how social workers from different correctional facilities in Spain present a high prevalence of burnout syndrome, a fact which had already been observed both in international¹⁰ and national¹¹ assessments. Furthermore, we have observed how certain sociodemographic and work-related variables can act as risk factors for this syndrome, emotional exhaustion and depersonalization being positive and personal achievement, negative as in the original questionnaire¹⁹.

As for the burnout questionnaire, average scores for the dimensions of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, despite being high, are slightly inferior to those concluded in previous studies for this group of professionals in Spain, where average scores of 24.6 for EE and 12.6 for depersonalization were concluded²¹. However, low personal achievement is more common in this study than in previous ones²¹.

Among sociodemographic variables associated to burnout, alike in previous studies¹⁰ and in contrast to others²¹, we have found higher average scores among women than men. Nevertheless, the age of participants played no significant role in the appearance

of the syndrome, as it had been pointed out in other studies¹⁴, where older ages implied higher degrees of burnout.

As for work-related variables, the duration of the current position as social worker was statistically associated to the dimensions of emotional exhaustion and low personal achievement, with increasing degrees of burnout syndrome as the time performing the same position passed, alike correctional staff in other countries¹⁰. On the other hand, and in contrast with other studies¹⁵, work shifts were not associated with any of the dimensions of MBI.

Previous research among staff depending of the Secretary General of Penitentiary Institutions^{11,21}, highlight that certain situations in the correctional setting, such as imposing a position of superiority to the imprisoned population can entail constant tension, and this can be directly linked to the high degree of burnout syndrome found among correctional staff.

Nonetheless, the degree of overall job satisfaction is like that concluded by previous international studies on this collective^{25,26}. Despite none of the sociodemographic and work-related variables being statistically associated with the degree of job satisfaction, as in other studies which considered genre and age²⁶, we have found associations with different dimensions of the MBI questionnaire.

Thus, we have been able to establish that emotional exhaustion is associated to both the degree of overall job satisfaction and intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Then as well personal achievement does so with overall job satisfaction and extrinsic factors. The dimension of depersonalization was not associated to the questionnaire on job satisfaction²⁴.

Table 1. Sociodemographic and work-related variables according to genre and for all participants.

Variables	Total (N = 59)		Female (n = 39)		Male (n = 20)	
	\bar{x}	SD	\bar{x}	SD	\bar{x}	SD
Age, years	44.9	7.9	44.2	8.4	46.2	6.7
Time worked, years	17.9	9.1	18.2	9.2	17.7	9.5
	n	% (95%CI)	n	% (95%CI)	n	% (95%CI)
Type of contract						
Indefinite	55	93.2 (86.4-98.6)	36	92.3 (83.3-99.8)	19	95.0 (83.3-99.7)
Fixed term	4	6.8 (0.4-11.6)	3	7.7 (2.4-12.7)	1	5.0 (3.4-13.7)
Work shift						
Morning	35	59.3 (45.8-72.9)	22	56.4 (41.9-73.0)	13	65.0 (45.0-85.7)
Morning and afternoon	24	40.7 (27.1-54.2)	17	43.6 (27.0-58.1)	7	35.0 (14.3-55.0)

Note. SD: standard deviation; 95%CI%: 95% confidence interval.

Table 2. Statistically significant associations between the MBI questionnaire and that on job satisfactions and sociodemographic and work-related variables.

Questionnaire	Total (N = 59)			Female (n = 39)			Male (n = 20)		
	\bar{x}	SD	Rango	\bar{x}	SD	Rango	\bar{x}	SD	Range
MBI									
Emotional exhaustion	20.1	11.9	0-54	22.6*	12.3	0-54	15.3	9.3	3-31
Depersonalization	10.6	5.0	0-23	11.2	5.1	0-23	9.4	4.9	0-20
Personal achievement	27.7	23.2	0-35	27.4	6.9	0-35	28.4	6.0	0-20
Job satisfaction									
Overall satisfaction	55.3	13.8	0-60	59.3*	15.9	0-51	53.3	12.4	0-54
Intrinsic factors	32.6	7.3	0-29	34.4	8.6	0-28	31.7	6.5	0-29
Extrinsic factors	22.7	7.6	0-35	24.9	7.6	0-24	21.6	7.4	0-29

Note. SD: standard deviation; * $p \leq 0.05$.

Table 3. Statistically significant associations between the MBI questionnaire and that on job satisfactions and sociodemographic and work-related variables.

	Age		Gender		Time worked		Work shift	
	r	p	r	p	r	p	r	p
MBI								
Emotional exhaustion	0.214	0.107	0.294*	0.024	0.314*	0.016	0.080	0.547
Depersonalization	-0.126	0.088	0.168	0.202	-0.069	0.608	0.213	0.105
Personal achievement	0.007	0.959	0.075*	0.042	0.411*	0.032	0.066	0.617
Job satisfaction								
Overall satisfaction	-0.090	0.501	-0.204	0.122	-0.002	0.988	0.150	0.258
Intrinsic factors	-0.170	0.197	-0.168	0.200	-0.040	0.767	0.223	0.161
Extrinsic factors	0.004	0.997	-0.206	0.118	0.035	0.795	0.117	0.379

Note. * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$.

Table 4. Statistically significant associations between the MBI questionnaire and that on job satisfaction.

	Emotional exhaustion		Depersonalization		Personal achievement	
	r	p	r	p	r	p
Overall satisfaction	0.336**	0.009	0.060	0.650	0.316*	0.015
Intrinsic factors	0.292*	0.025	0.005	0.971	0.234	0.075
Extrinsic factors	0.328*	0.011	-0.336	0.388	0.350***	0.007

Note. * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$.

Among the main limitations that we should consider when interpreting the results hereby presented, we should first examine the study's methodology (cross-sectional analytical) where unlike longitudinal studies we can not assess the evolution of data through time or consider the efficacy of certain software aimed at reducing this problem. Moreover, insofar as this study exclusively targets social workers, we can not

compare our results to those of previous papers since addressing exclusively correctional social workers we have a smaller sample than that of other studies which have considered all correctional staff²⁶.

Last, the main limitation consists of the lack of specific information which can play a significant role in the appearance of this syndrome, as for example, the impact of the size and population of the correc-

tional facility¹⁷, the absence of support from other colleagues and/or supervisors¹⁰, or violent behaviours by the imprisoned population²⁷.

Despite these limitations, we consider that the main weight of this study resides in the fact that it exclusively addresses correctional social workers, since we had not found studies on this population in national nor international literature. Furthermore, we have observed the impact of burnout syndrome in the degree of job satisfaction.

In conclusion, the results of this study show that correctional social workers present a high degree of burnout syndrome, in particular regarding the dimension of emotional exhaustion. We have also observed, as for the degree of job satisfaction, the impact of different sociodemographic and work-related variables in the occupational health of participant social workers.

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